

# Our Missteps and God's Perfect Steps

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*From First Chronicles*

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**Bible Text:** 1 Chronicles 21:1-30

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The title of the message is, "Our Missteps and God's Perfect Steps." You might reduce this theme into a statement that would go something like this. God uses your missteps in the performance of his perfect steps. God uses your missteps in the performance of his perfect steps. And in 1 Chronicles 21 one of the things that we see is a misstep that David takes and how this leads to David grasping God's perfect steps.

But before we go into the chapter directly, let me just say a couple of things about 1 Chronicles. First Chronicles is a book that we often assume is a parallel with 1 and 2 Kings. It is a kind of ditto mark in the Bible. But this is not the case. In fact, this is not the case for a couple of reasons.

First, Chronicles covers a different territory. If you look at 1 Chronicles chapter one and verse one you see it begins with Adam. And so the Chronicler goes all the way back to Adam to begin his story. And 2 Chronicles ends with the promise that Cyrus will issue a decree and the people will come back from captivity. And so the book covers this huge span of territory.

1 and 2 Kings is a little bit more compact and it actually begins shortly after the story that we are going to look at in 1 Chronicles 21. Second Samuel ends with this story. And 2 Kings ends with the people going into captivity. So we have these differences as far as time is concerned.

And then there is also a difference in emphasis between Kings and Chronicles. In Kings there is more of an emphasis upon the monarchy and a record of the kings and particularly David. And then in Chronicles the emphasis is a little bit different. Some suppose that Ezra, who was a scribe and a priest, wrote Chronicles. And if this is the case we see some of his influence in Chronicles; that is, the emphasis upon the priesthood and upon the temple and all that goes into the work of the temple. Chronicles seems to give us this perspective.

It is important to see that this is the case when we look at 1 Chronicles 21 because despite what we read in the narrative—maybe that doesn't sound very good—despite what we read in the narrative, we can't just take the narrative and pull it out of its context and say,

“Oh, yes, we understand what is happening.” The narrative is occurring in this particular context in which there is emphasis upon the temple and upon the priesthood.

And so with this in mind I would like to go directly to 1 Chronicles 21 and just work through the chapter. It is a fairly lengthy chapter, but I think we can do this without too much difficulty. And we’ll see the lesson that emerges. We’ll see how God uses the missteps of David to bring about his perfect steps, as I am putting it.

1 Chronicles 21 beginning with verse one,

“Then Satan stood up against Israel and moved David to number Israel.”<sup>1</sup>

Here the archenemy of God’s people, the devil, gets David to act in an unseemly way. Of course, as Paul says, “We wrestle not against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers.”<sup>2</sup> And we see this clearly in the life of David.

Verse two,

So David said to Joab and to the princes of the people, “Go, number Israel from Beersheba even to Dan, and bring me word that I may know their number.”

Joab said, “May the LORD add to His people a hundred times as many as they are! But, my lord the king, are they not all my lord’s servants? Why does my lord seek this thing? Why should he be a cause of guilt to Israel?”<sup>3</sup>

Joab understands David’s heart better than David understands his own heart. David is desirous of numbering the people so that he can understand the kind of army he has at his disposal and the power he has.

Now part of the difficulty is that the kings were to seek the Lord in the designated place. That is, before God in the tabernacle. The tabernacle is now located north of Jerusalem in Gibeon. And at this point David has brought the Ark of the Covenant into Jerusalem and put it in a tent in Jerusalem. And, as we will read later, David is afraid. David is afraid to go up to Gibeon to seek the Lord because, as you may remember, when they first attempted to bring the Ark of the Covenant down from Kiriath-jearim to Jerusalem Uzzah put out his hand to steady the ark and God killed him on the spot because he wasn’t a Levite.

And so now David is fearful. And he is not seeking the Lord as he ought. On the other hand, astoundingly, he is seeking his own strength and doing this through the temptation of the enemy to number the people.

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<sup>1</sup> 1 Chronicles 21:1.

<sup>2</sup> Ephesians 6:12.

<sup>3</sup> 1 Chronicles 21:2-3.

Verse four,

Nevertheless, the king's word prevailed against Joab. Therefore, Joab departed and went throughout all Israel, and came to Jerusalem. Joab gave the number of the census of all the people to David. And all Israel were 1,100,000 men who drew the sword; and Judah was 470,000 men who drew the sword.<sup>4</sup>

This is a substantial army. David is probably pounding his chest a little bit. "This is good," he says. But is it really?

Verse six, it says, "[Joab] did not number Levi and Benjamin among them, for the king's command was abhorrent to Joab."<sup>5</sup>

Joab knew this was an error. This was a misstep on the part of David.

Verse seven tells us plainly then, "God was displeased with this thing, so He struck Israel."<sup>6</sup>

God's displeasure was manifested. We don't know how in this circumstance, but it apparently was in a very visible and dramatic way. It was dramatic enough that God got David's attention because we read in verse eight, "David said to God, 'I have sinned greatly, in that I have done this thing. But now, please take away the iniquity of Your servant, for I have done very foolishly.'"<sup>7</sup>

And is this not the proper posture? When you realize your sin, your error, your misstep, you ought to repent and you ought to seek forgiveness from God. David manifests here that he is a man after God's own heart. That is, he is not perfect, but he has an inclination to love God. And when you strip away everything this was the basic inclination of his heart, to love God. And so, when he was rebuked, he repented.

And do you remember? This was the case when Nathan the prophet came to David after David sinned with Bathsheba and had Bathsheba's husband, Uriah the Hittite murdered. Nathan came and said, "You are the man."<sup>8</sup> David melted and repented.

And so it is in this case. David did repent and he says at the end of verse eight, "Your servant has acted foolishly."<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> 1 Chronicles 21:4-5.

<sup>5</sup> 1 Chronicles 21:6.

<sup>6</sup> 1 Chronicles 21:7.

<sup>7</sup> 1 Chronicles 21:8.

<sup>8</sup> 2 Samuel 12:7.

<sup>9</sup> See 1 Chronicles 21:8.

The LORD spoke to Gad, David's seer, saying, "Go and speak to David, saying, 'Thus says the LORD, "I offer you three things; choose for yourself one of them, which I will do to you."'"<sup>10</sup>

Notice the language. "You have got a choice of three things and you pick, but this is going to be done *to* you." In other words, the temporal judgment will come. You have sinned and you have brought disgrace upon the people and therefore openly, publicly, temporally, you will face the discipline.

Now we all have to acknowledge this, do we not, that you may sin in this life and I may sin in this life. We can go to God and ask for forgiveness; but if there are civil penalties, we must pay. We will pay them. If there are ecclesiastical penalties that we ought to pay, we will pay them. In this world we will be disciplined and we will suffer the consequences. This is how it works. And I think we all understand that this is the case.

And so God says to David, "This is what will be done *to* you."<sup>11</sup>

And three choices are given. "Either three years of famine, or three months to be swept away before your foes, while the sword of your enemies overtakes you, or else three days of the sword of the LORD, even pestilence in the land, and the angel of the LORD destroying throughout all the territory of Israel.' Now, therefore, consider what answer I shall return to Him who sent me."<sup>12</sup>

David is no doubt saying, "Oh, my." Three *good* choices? Maybe not!

Three months of famine, the sword of the enemy, or the sword of the Lord.

David is in great distress. It says this is the case in verse 13. "David said to Gad, 'I am in great distress; please let me fall into the hand of the LORD, for His mercies are very great. But do not let me fall into the hand of man.'"<sup>13</sup>

This is probably the most familiar portion in 1 Chronicles 21 and you may have heard sermons on this particular text, very likely taken out of its context. Because this is a prominent text embedded in this narrative, we might think this is the center piece of the story. But I caution you again, because Chronicles has an emphasis on the temple and on the priesthood. It is not David's choices and David's decision which is central in this narrative. This narrow situation is a step in the perfect steps of God and in understanding these perfect steps.

And so David must make a choice. And he does choose wisely. It is always better to be in the hand of God.

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<sup>10</sup> 1 Chronicles 21:9-10

<sup>11</sup> See 1 Chronicles 21:10, emphasis added.

<sup>12</sup> 1 Chronicles 21:12.

<sup>13</sup> 1 Chronicles 21:13.

Verse 14, “So the LORD sent a pestilence on Israel; 70,000 men of Israel fell.”<sup>14</sup>

“Ok, David. You numbered the men. You were proud of the army that you could muster. In a moment I can take tens of thousands of these men away from you. In a moment I can do this,” says the Lord. “Your strength is not in the sword or in the spear or in the soldier or in the army. Your strength is in me.” And, of course, this is part of the lesson that David is learning.

Verse 15,

And God sent an angel to Jerusalem to destroy it; but as he was about to destroy it, the LORD saw and was sorry over the calamity, and said to the destroying angel, “It is enough; now relax your hand.” And the angel of the LORD was standing by the threshing floor of Ornan the Jebusite.<sup>15</sup>

The angel of the Lord sent to Jerusalem is a destroying angel. The burden of the text is not actually that God changes his mind. “God is not a man that he should repent.”<sup>16</sup> But we should simply gather from this language that it was God’s intent all along to withhold his hand because he has a greater purpose in view.

And the angel of the LORD was standing by the threshing floor of Ornan the Jebusite. Then David lifted up his eyes and saw the angel of the LORD standing between earth and heaven, with his drawn sword in his hand stretched out over Jerusalem.<sup>17</sup>

In your mind’s eye, imagine the glorious angel standing heavenward above Jerusalem with his sword drawn from his scabbard ready to strike. And you can imagine that David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem were in great fear because of the presence of this angel. They knew that thousands had already been slain.

And so what is the reaction of David?

Verse 16, at its end, says, “Then David and the elders, covered with sackcloth....”<sup>18</sup> They covered themselves with sackcloth. They were mourning the disaster which had taken place in Israel. They were frightened because of the destroying angel. They are falling on their faces before God, prostrating themselves upon the ground, and begging for mercy. And you can understand how this would be the case.

And David said to God, verse 17, “Is it not I who commanded to count the people? Indeed, I am the one who has sinned and done very wickedly, but these sheep, what have

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<sup>14</sup> 1 Chronicles 21:14.

<sup>15</sup> 1 Chronicles 21:15.

<sup>16</sup> See Numbers 23:19.

<sup>17</sup> 1 Chronicles 21:15-16.

<sup>18</sup> 1 Chronicles 21:16.

they done? O LORD my God, please let Your hand be against me and my father's household, but not against Your people that they should be plagued."<sup>19</sup>

"Lord, I am the man." And David is willing to admit this. And, of course, it is a frightful situation in which he finds himself as the angel of the Lord is standing above him with his sword hanging, as it were, over his neck and the neck of his people. David cries out with the elders. And you once again see that the sin of one affects, not only one, but it affects many. Is this not always the case?

I am amused at those who would say, "Oh, my sin is very private. It doesn't affect anyone else." This is not likely the case. Those who engage in sexual promiscuity, for example, will often say, "It is a private sin. It doesn't affect others."

Oh, yes it does affect others. At least two people are engaged in such sins. Then it is like dropping a pebble in a pond. And the rings of the effects begin to spread. This is always the case with our sin. And so it is with David. As a result, David, in this circumstance, pleads with God on behalf of the people.

We continue with verse 18. "Then the angel of the LORD commanded Gad to say to David, that David should go up and build an altar to the LORD on the threshing floor of Ornan the Jebusite."<sup>20</sup>

Jerusalem was on the hill which had been taken by David. It had been inhabited by the Jebusites and David conquered that hill, made it his own city, built the walls, and inhabited that city. He called it the city of David. But here we have this Jebusite who remains in the city. And he has a threshing floor, which was not uncommon. "So David went up at the word of Gad, which he spoke in the name of the LORD. Now Ornan turned back and saw the angel."<sup>21</sup>

Ok. There he is, the angel hanging in the sky, sword drawn. "Now Ornan turned back and saw the angel, and his four sons who were with him hid themselves."<sup>22</sup> The four sons ducked for cover. "And Ornan was threshing wheat."<sup>23</sup> I'll bet at that moment he wasn't, although he was engaged in this process when interrupted.

"As David came to Ornan, Ornan looked and saw David."<sup>24</sup> Ornan recognized David as the king, "and went out from the threshing floor and prostrated himself before David with his face to the ground."<sup>25</sup>

Now you can understand that Ornan is a little taken up in this situation also. He knows what happened, that tens of thousands have been killed. And here is this destroying angel

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<sup>19</sup> 1 Chronicles 21:17.

<sup>20</sup> 1 Chronicles 21:18.

<sup>21</sup> 1 Chronicles 21:19-20.

<sup>22</sup> 1 Chronicles 21:20.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

<sup>24</sup> 1 Chronicles 21:21.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

and now the king comes. Something important is up and Ornan throws himself on the ground before David.

Then David said to Ornan, “Give me the site of this threshing floor, that I may build on it an altar to the LORD; for the full price you shall give it to me, that the plague may be restrained from the people.”

Ornan said to David, “Hands up.” “Take it for yourself; and let my lord the king do what is good in his sight.”<sup>26</sup>

In other words, it’s all yours. You can have it.

“See, I will give the oxen for burnt offerings and the threshing sledges for wood and the wheat for the grain offering; I will give it all.”

But King David said to Ornan, “No, but I will surely buy it for the full price; for I will not take what is yours for the LORD, or offer a burnt offering which costs me nothing.”

So David gave Ornan 600 shekels of gold by weight for the site.<sup>27</sup>

Now these 600 shekels were probably around 15 pounds of gold. And at today’s price for gold this would be over \$210,000. So this was no small sum. This was the case, even in David’s time. And David was willing to buy this land. He felt compelled to buy it.

So David gave Ornan 600 shekels of gold by weight for the site. Then David built an altar to the LORD there and offered burnt offerings and peace offerings. And he called to the LORD and He answered him with fire from heaven on the altar of burnt offering.<sup>28</sup>

Now I want you to notice several things about verse 26. First of all, the altar there is called the altar of burnt offering. If Ezra is the author of Chronicles, he is looking back at this situation and he is thinking about the temple and the tabernacle. And it was the tabernacle where the altar of burnt offering was actually situated. And the tabernacle at this time, as I say, was in Gibeon which was eight or 10 miles north and west of Jerusalem.

And then we also see that David offered burnt offerings and peace offerings. David assumed the office of a priest in this circumstance. And he did so lawfully because it was by the command of God. Unlike Saul who earlier presumed to offer sacrifices and as a result was discharged from his duties as king. Here David acts in the office of a priest and we see the office of the king and the office of the priest coming together in one man,

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<sup>26</sup> 1 Chronicles 21:22-23.

<sup>27</sup> 1 Chronicles 21:23-25.

<sup>28</sup> 1 Chronicles 21:25-26.

pointing to the great prophet, priest and king Jesus Christ. And you will recall that David is also a prophet, so called in the New Testament.

And so David offered sacrifices. He offers burnt offerings. The burnt offerings were the regular offerings of Israel morning and evening. And they pointed particularly to atonement.

And then there were the peace offerings. And the peace offerings were so named because they were fellowship offerings. And the people themselves would partake of the peace offerings. When there was atonement properly given there was peace with God. And so David offers burnt offerings and peace offerings.

And then, finally, what do you see? Fire comes down from heaven and consumes the offerings, authenticating the sacrifices, and authenticating the altar.

This had happened before, much earlier.

When the original altar for burnt offering was constructed and consecrated and the first offerings were put on the altar by Aaron, fire came down from heaven and authenticated that offering and that altar. God was saying to the people that this was the place of worship before him. And a similar thing now takes place.

Verse 26 again,

Then David built an altar to the LORD there and offered burnt offerings and peace offerings. And he called to the LORD and He answered him with fire from heaven on the altar of burnt offering. The LORD commanded the angel, and he put his sword back in its sheath.<sup>29</sup>

The angel places his sword back in the sheath. And I am sure when David saw this there was a huge sigh of relief. The text continues,

At that time, when David saw that the LORD had answered him on the threshing floor of Ornan the Jebusite, he offered sacrifice there. For the tabernacle of the LORD, which Moses had made in the wilderness, and the altar of burnt offering were in the high place at Gibeon at that time. But David could not go before it to inquire of God, for he was terrified by the sword of the angel of the LORD.<sup>30</sup>

David would not go up to Gibeon to offer sacrifices. He was therefore prohibited from seeking the Lord. Whether this reference to the angel of the Lord in verse 30 is that angel that stood over Jerusalem at this time or the earlier smiting of Uzzah when the ark was first transported, I don't think we know. But at least this we do know. Because of what had taken place, David was reluctant to go up to Gibeon. But now, we see, he continued

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<sup>29</sup> 1 Chronicles 21:26-27.

<sup>30</sup> 1 Chronicles 21:28-30.



to offer sacrifices in the place that has now been authenticated by God with fire from heaven.

We need to read verse one chapter 22. “Then David said, ‘This is the house of the LORD God, and this is the altar of burnt offering for Israel.’”<sup>31</sup>

David says to himself, “Over 400 years ago God promised that when we entered the land he would show us a place of his choice where the temple was to be built. And now I see. This is the place. This is the place God talked about in Deuteronomy chapter 12 when he said to the people, ‘You shall go up to the place I designate, I choose, and there you shall offer your burnt offerings and your sacrifices to me and pay your vows and pay your tithes.’”<sup>32</sup>

David is now saying, “This is the place. God has now revealed to us, after these many centuries, the place of his choosing.”

“So David gave orders to gather the foreigners who were in the land of Israel, and he set stonecutters to hew out stones to build the house of God.”<sup>33</sup>

God, in the order of his perfect steps, was now showing David and all Israel the place he had chosen to dwell and where the temple would be built. And it was through David’s misstep that he began to discern, as an outcome in this case, God’s perfect steps.

Amazing! Amazing!

Is this not how God works in so many circumstances? He takes our missteps and uses them to bring about, in an orderly fashion, his will, his plans, and his purposes. He uses our missteps to work out his perfect steps.

It seems to me it is pretty plain in this text that this is happening. And, of course, it has to do with this whole matter of worship. And this is why I gave you a little information about Chronicles at the outset. But this is just one lesson that we get. And I think that is an important lesson for you and me. God uses your missteps in the working out of his perfect steps.

Shall I give you a couple of examples, contemporary examples? Ok. I’ll use my own life. I talked to you last week about the falling-out I had with my father and the sinful nature of that falling-out I had with my father. I spoke to you about how I asked the army to send me to Korea in my frustration and my desire to get away from my family.

And what happened? When I went to Korea, when I fled from my family, I fled into the arms of Christ. This is what happened to me. I met a chaplain there in Korea who led me

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<sup>31</sup> 1 Chronicles 22:1.

<sup>32</sup> See Deuteronomy 12:5.

<sup>33</sup> 1 Chronicles 22:2.

to Christ. And my missteps were utilized in God's perfect plan to work out his perfect steps. Praise God that this is the case.

Would it be all right if I used an example that is a little closer to home? Maybe in this previous work of calling a pastor there were some missteps. And in retrospect you recognize this is the case. And like David you make some course corrections. And what happens? You begin to see God's perfect steps. This is what happens. God uses your missteps as he works out his perfect steps.

*Thank you, Lord, that this is indeed the case.*

Let's pray together.

*Father, we've looked at a wonderful story here in Chronicles. And we have just, in a manner of speaking, touched the surface of it. We pray that you will teach us through your Word how good you actually are and how you are pleased in your grace to work out your plans. Your steps are always perfect. And thank you, Father, that as we recognize our missteps, as we repent of them, and as seek your face as David did here, we will see the working out of your perfect steps. Thank you that this is the case.*

*Grant us grace and peace through a proper understanding of these things we pray in the great and good and glorious name of Jesus Christ the Lord. Amen.*